Written by Lynn Campbell
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Democratic U.S. Senate candidate Tom Fiegen used a second televised forum Thursday night to attack opponent Roxanne Conlin, this time about her connection with a Monsanto lobbyist and her job as a trial lawyer.

About halfway through the forum (sponsored by IowaPolitics.com, Mediacom, the Cedar Rapids *Gazette*, and the League of Women Voters of Johnson County), Fiegen was asked about flood relief -- an issue key to residents of flood-ravaged Cedar Rapids -- but instead decided to use the moment to launch the attack.

"I want to address the special interests," said Fiegen, a former state senator. "One of the things that Roxanne has run on is she's not taken any money from lobbyists. But one of her BFFs, that's best friends forever, [is] a gentleman by the name of Jerry Crawford. ... Since then, Jerry Crawford has received $150,000 as a registered federal lobbyist from Monsanto."

Conlin maintained that she is not taking any money from lobbyists. "I am suing Monsanto and that's not just any lawsuit," she said. "It is a nationwide, class-action against Monsanto for anti-trust violations. And most people think that that's the lawsuit that caused the federal government to look into Monsanto's potential violations of the anti-trust laws. I'm an anti-trust lawyer, and I'm not going to even respond to your cheap shot."

This was not the first time that Conlin has been attacked over the issue. Last December, the third Democratic U.S. Senate candidate, Bob Krause -- who had a delayed flight from Arkansas and was not able to make it to Thursday night's forum -- raised the issue of Conlin's tie to the Monsanto lobbyist. Conlin acknowledged earlier this year in an interview with Blog for Iowa that she and Crawford are close friends, and that she has known him more than 50 years. But she said she found the criticism "hysterical" and "silly" because she's suing Monsanto.

Thursday night's forum also marked the second time that Fiegen attacked Conlin over special interests. At a debate Monday, he questioned the $20 million in tax credits that she and her husband received since last year to build low- and moderate-income houses.

Conlin came to Thursday's forum armed with new numbers to defend the tax credits that she

and her husband received. She said the low-income-tax-credit program that Conlin Properties participates in created nearly 1,600 units and 2,400 jobs. "The money doesn't come to us," she said. "It's an equity-financing device."

The two candidates also discussed abortion, immigration, and President Barack Obama's reaction to the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico.

"I feel impatient," Conlin said. "I watch the TV and see that oil gushing out of there, and I think, 'Good grief, there must be something more that can be done.' But this was really a failure that happened in so many different ways. I would like to see the president move his office to New Orleans and be there on the ground helping however he can with that problem. We need to see him; we need to know he's there; we need to know he's engaged."

But Fiegen said he thinks criticism of Obama over the oil spill is unfair. "Certainly, Democrats are in charge, but I don't believe the president is a geologist, and I'm not sure that his presence in New Orleans would help."

Grassley Holds Big Fundraising Edge in Senate Race

In the race for the U.S. Senate, incumbent Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) outraised Des Moines Democrat Conlin more than two-to-one in the pre-primary fundraising period and has more than six times as much cash on hand.

Grassley reported $423,936 in donations taken in from April 1 to May 19, while Conlin brought in $181,553. Grassley also has nearly $5.6 million waiting for whoever emerges from the three-way Democratic primary in which Conlin, who has $870,643 on hand, is the perceived front-runner.

Conlin's campaign manager stressed that her contributions were from 1,168 individuals, and that 80 percent of the contributions were $100 or less. Her campaign has emphasized that it does not accept money from political action committees or Washington, D.C., lobbyists.

Grassley took $150,450 from PACs during the period, and has accepted more than $2.75 million from the groups this election cycle.

Numbers for Democratic U.S. Senate candidates Krause and Fiegen were not immediately available.

Gingrich Maintains That His Focus Is on 2010 but Will Compete in Iowa if He Runs in 2012

It was the elephant in the room: Is former U.S. House Speaker Newt Gingrich going to run for president in 2012? He maintained Wednesday during a visit to Davenport that his focus is on the 2010 midterm elections.

"We have to keep Senator Grassley in the Senate," Gingrich insisted. "We have to pick up a couple of House seats. We have to win the state legislature. I mean '10 is a big deal, and people don't have to worry about '12 'til we finish our job in '10."

But Gingrich said if he does choose to run in 2012, "of course" he'd run in Iowa. "My wife is a graduate of Luther College, so how could I skip Iowa?" he said. "Some of her closest friends are here."

The former speaker of the House was one of the only perceived 2012 Republican presidential candidates who had not previously visited Iowa in this election cycle. He made up for lost time Wednesday, doing a whirlwind three-stop tour that began in Cedar Rapids and ended in Des Moines, with a Davenport speech and book-signing in between.

After the speech, Gingrich was peppered with questions from the media:

- On 2010 elections: He said he thinks the odds are even money that Republicans can win the U.S. House.
- On Republicans being the "party of no": Gingrich said his book *To Save America: Stopping Obama's Secular Socialist Machine* is two-thirds solutions. "If you look at what Kevin McCarthy [R-California] is doing to design a contract this fall, it's all positive. If you look at Paul Ryan's [R-Wisconsin] work on entitlement reform, it's probably the most comprehensive reform done in modern times." Gingrich said Republicans shouldn't be blamed for opposing Obama's ideas. He also said the news media isn't interested in covering Republican ideas and urged people to check out HealthTransformation.net, which he said is "filled with positive ideas."

- On Governor Chet Culver: "The number of allegations surrounding Culver is highly unusual for a governor of Iowa. It would not be that unusual for a governor of Illinois, let me leave it at that. Is that a fair way to put it?" Gingrich added that nothing he's said about Culver is nearly as strong as what state legislators have said.

Gingrich also said Wednesday during his visit to Iowa that he likes the Tea Party. "I think it brings new people into politics," he said. "It gives them a place to work, to study and learn, and I find most of them to be very sincere citizens who are very worried about the country's future."

The former Georgia congressman spoke in Davenport as part of the American Future Fund's conservative lecture series.

Culver and Branstad Spar Over Department on Aging

Former Republican Governor and current gubernatorial candidate Terry Branstad today called for Democratic Governor Chet Culver to remove John McCalley as director of the Department on Aging [IDA] and replace him with someone who will advocate for seniors and work with the commission and the area agencies on aging.

But Culver's re-election campaign called it hypocritical for Branstad to call for McCalley's firing when Branstad himself dealt with a similar situation in 1995 and chose not to fire his department director.

The call comes as the Iowa Department on Aging has been accused of interfering with the work of Iowa's long-term-care ombudsman. Branstad said it's wrong that it takes an order from the federal government for McCalley and the Culver administration to enforce rules that allow the ombudsman to do her job and advocate for seniors.

"This new controversy surrounding the Department on Aging once again shows the current administration is bent on keeping Iowans in the dark when it comes to the work of state government," Branstad said. "This is additional evidence that Governor Culver has populated key state agencies with leaders less interested in serving Iowans and more interested in keeping Iowans in the dark about the activities of his administration."

Culver's office has defended McCalley as having an accomplished track record, and for being a strong change agent and a true advocate for constituents. Jim Flansburg, communications director for Culver's office, also acknowledged that one of the duties of an agency "is to ensure it works within the changing rules of the federal government.

"To that end, the governor has directed John McCalley to ensure that all departmental practices and policies are in full compliance with applicable federal law," Flansburg said.

But Culver's campaign took on Branstad directly on the issue.

"Branstad's statement on the IDA ombudsman is inaccurate, and his suggestion that the governor's office fire the IDA director is hypocritical," said Culver Campaign Manager Donn Stanley. "Branstad hopes people have forgotten his record and that reporters won't bother to fact-check his statements. Be assured our campaign will continue to help keep him honest."

Stanley said that in 1995, then-long-term-care ombudsman Carl McPherson said he was "muzzled" after he wrote reports critical of the Branstad administration's oversight of nursing homes. McPherson was reassigned in a way that no longer allowed him to speak publicly to the issues and ensured that no additional such reports would be published.

Transportation Company Picks Iowa for Midwest HQ

A company specializing in arranging transportation for Medicaid enrollees will locate its Midwestern headquarters in Des Moines this fall, creating up to 100 jobs and saving the state about $1 million annually, Culver said.

TMS Management Group, a transportation broker based in Clearwater, Florida, has won a three-year contract to arrange nonemergency transportation for Iowa Medicaid members. The company, which provides a similar service in several Midwestern states, subsequently decided to create a customer call center in Des Moines to administer all of its Midwest operations.

"We're saving Iowa tax money while improving nonemergency transportation for eligible Medicaid recipients," Culver said. "In addition, we're providing an enormous work-saver for state employees, and we get additional jobs for Iowa."

Federal law requires states to provide health-related transportation for Medicaid enrollees. In Iowa and many other states, Medicaid reimburses enrollees for the cost of providing their own rides to doctors or pharmacies.

Beginning in October, TMS will assume responsibility for administering this program. TMS will provide the service for about $10 million a year -- which is similar to the current system -- but Iowa taxpayers will save about $1 million a year because the federal share of the cost is greater under the new system.

This weekly summary comes from IowaPolitics.com , an online government and politics news service. Reporter Andrew Duffelmeyer and other correspondents contributed to this report.